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The UN: Under renovation but open for business

Address by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Dr Jan Peter Balkenende, to the 65th United Nations General Assembly, New York, 25 September 2010

Mr President, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

UN Headquarters is currently undergoing a major renovation. And that is a good thing, because the building no longer meets the requirements of the new century. In the meantime, work goes on as usual, and here we all are, discussing the big issues of the day.

Of course, the parallels are obvious. The UN system itself has now reached a certain age and is also in need of renovation. And in this sense, too, the UN's day-to-day work must go on, for we cannot afford to take a break in tackling the global problems we face. The UN may be under renovation, but it has to stay open for business.

It is 65 years since the UN was established in San Francisco. There, and at Bretton Woods, the world's leaders laid the foundations for our multilateral system upon the smoking ruins of the Second World War. It is a system that has proven itself. But it is based on post-war realities, not on the international balance of power and the global problems of today.

I use the word 'renovation', because we do not need to build from scratch. Over the past 65 years, the system has more than proven itself. There is nothing wrong with the foundations or the basic structure. Besides, experience has taught us that a practical, step-by-step approach is a more effective way to reform a large organisation than a 'big bang' strategy. Or, as Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the UN's great leaders, put it: 'Constant attention by a good nurse may be just as important as a major operation by a surgeon.'

Today, I would like to look briefly at three of the UN's core tasks in order to show how the Dutch government views various concrete reforms in practical terms. Those tasks relate to human rights, the international legal order, and peace and security. But let me begin with the background to these renovations, using my own experience as a guide. Why are they necessary?

[The need for reforms]

Mr President, in human terms, 65 years is often an age at which we start to take things easier. Unfortunately, that is not an option for the UN. For despite all our efforts, peace, security, legal certainty and development are still not guaranteed for everyone. In fact, since the UN was established, the global challenges facing us have only grown larger. Take the climate crisis. Or the energy and food crisis. Or the international economic crisis that has shown so clearly how closely connected everything is in our time. We need each other more than ever before. And we need the UN, as the organisation uniting us, more than ever before.

In this light, I applaud the choice of debate theme for this 65th General Assembly: 'Reaffirming the central role of the UN in global governance'. Although I must confess, I would have replaced the word 'reaffirming' with 'recovering'. Because ground has clearly been lost, and this has become especially apparent in the last few years. The G20, and not the UN, has taken the lead in tackling the economic crisis, for example. The UN climate summit could have delivered more if

the world had been able to unite behind the tough decisions. And where the MDGs are concerned, we see mixed results. A lot has been achieved, but on some Goals we are lagging far behind, thanks to a fragmented and defective international aid architecture. We discussed this earlier in the week at the MDG summit.

What these examples show is that the UN is losing its position – and its convening power – as the obvious global platform for discussion and decision-making. But while it pains me to say this, I also have every faith that the UN can continue in the future to claim its vital role as the world's overarching governance organisation.

In my view, the end of the Cold War freed the UN from a long period of confrontation and stagnation. In its wake the international agenda was redefined with great speed and vigour. Relatively new topics like the environment and climate change, social themes and gender issues began to claim our attention. The international legal order was strengthened by new international tribunals, the International Criminal Court and a growing number of peace missions under the UN flag. And of course, in setting the MDGs at its Millennium Summit, the UN showed how ambitious it can be.

The UN is only able to achieve these things because every country is involved and everyone has a voice. That is the UN's power, but also its greatest weakness. Inclusion does not only foster legitimacy – the UN's unique selling point. It also leads to sluggish decision-making, politicised relationships and a bureaucratic structure that lacks transparency. I believe that anyone familiar with the international circuit over the past ten years will recognise this picture.

It is often said, 'If the UN did not exist it would have to be invented.' And indeed, a global organisation with universal membership is essential. But no matter how representative an organisation may be, it will lose its relevance if it does not deliver sufficient results. In short: legitimacy and effectiveness are two sides of the same coin.

The Dutch government is convinced that the UN can improve its effectiveness and decisiveness and so increase its legitimacy and public support. This can be done by putting the UN's process and organisation in the service of solving problems. By putting practical considerations first when problems are tackled. The Netherlands wants to see that happen, and will work to make it happen. We will do so as a founding member of the United Nations, but also together with our partners in the European Union of which we also are a founding member. The European Union is strongly committed to the United Nations. And we subscribe to its contributions to secure the UN's future.

[Human rights]

And so, Mr President, I come to the first of the three core tasks I mentioned at the start of my speech: human rights. This, without question, is an area in which the UN has achieved great success in setting standards, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the unshakeable basis. Unfortunately, though, it still falls short in enforcing those standards. We still hear reports every day of torture, unfair trials, curbs on freedom of expression, and other human rights violations. The Dutch government considers it unacceptable that people, often women, are still being stoned to death in 2010. We must continue to resist this practice with every ounce of our being.

The Dutch government urges that the capacity of the human rights machinery, and particularly the Human Rights Council, be strengthened. To start with, a clear division of tasks between the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee of this General Assembly is needed. Overlap and lack of clarity make it too easy for some regimes to distract attention from human rights violations. The Netherlands will press for clarity.

[International legal order]

Of course, human rights are closely related to the international legal order, the second area I want to touch on. As you know, this is a subject very close to the Netherlands' heart. The city of The Hague is not only the centre of Dutch democracy, it is also the 'legal capital of the world'. And we are proud of that. But more important, of course, is the fact that the international institutions based in The Hague are sending a clear message with the work they undertake. The international community will not allow human rights violations and crimes against humanity to go unpunished. That applies to the various ad hoc tribunals, such as the Yugoslavia Tribunal. It also applies to the International Court of Justice. And of course, the International Criminal Court.

Over the last 20 years international criminal law has developed at an impressive rate. Today, those who commit the most terrible crimes, wherever in the world they may be, know that their chances of being called to account are growing by the day. Now we must act boldly. We must strengthen these institutions' visibility, credibility and authority. We can do that by improving international cooperation on investigations and prosecutions. By increasing compliance with the relevant Security Council resolutions. And by pushing for as many countries as possible to sign the Rome Statute and to conduct themselves according to both its letter and its spirit. With that in mind, I say that it is unacceptable to the Dutch government that someone like President Bashir of Sudan, against whom an arrest warrant is outstanding, should be allowed to move freely in a country that is an ICC partner.

[Peace and security]

In closing, Mr President, I would like to say a few words about the broad topic of peace and security. At this moment, there are some 100,000 people taking part in UN peace missions around the world. So no one can deny that the UN plays a leading role in this area. And rightly so, because it is precisely in matters of war and peace that legitimacy and resolve are most essential. Legitimacy and resolve that only the UN and the Security Council can provide.

We saw only recently, in the incident involving the Republic of Korea's naval ship the *Cheonan*, how difficult and shaky the position of the Security Council can sometimes be. On the one hand, the Council condemned the attack unanimously and in strong terms. And that has to be applauded. On the other hand, the Council remained silent on the question of blame, which is an extremely hard thing to bear for the survivors and the victims' loved ones.

It is precisely in order to guarantee the legitimacy and strength of the Security Council in the future that the Dutch government continues to support reforms to the Council that reflect the geopolitical realities of today and not of 1945. Naturally, the exact substance of these reforms is still open to debate. But it is clear to the Netherlands that there should be room for more countries to join the discussions and exert influence. Room for those large countries that in 1945 were not yet large enough or were not yet members of the UN. But also room for smaller nations that, as troop-supplying countries or as interested parties in a particular region, should have the right to

speak. I would add immediately that countries that want influence should realise that this entails financial, political and moral obligations. Or, in the words of Winston Churchill: ‘The price of greatness is responsibility’.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

I have briefly sketched why the UN is in need of renovation. I hope I have made clear that the UN’s relevance is tied not only to its legitimacy but also to its effectiveness. And I have suggested the direction the renovation might take in three specific areas. One thing I have not yet done, however, is to reaffirm that the Netherlands, in keeping with its long international tradition, will continue to work for quality in the UN system. Together with others, together with you all, we will work in the knowledge that this renovation, like all our activities, requires us to pool our resources. Or as the UN Charter says: ‘Unite our strength, combine our efforts.’ Let these words inspire us in the work that lies ahead.

Thank you.